

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7945

INFO AMEMBASSY TOKYO

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SEOUL 0339

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, KS

SUBJECT: REGIME TOLERATING STEPPED-UP OPPOSITION ACTIVITY

REF: SEOUL 8124

1. SUMMARY: OPPOSITION ACTIVITY HAS INCREASED PERCEPTIBLY IN RECENT WEEKS BOTH ON THE PART OF THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY (NDP) AND AMONG RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL ACTION GROUPS. REGIME APPEARS WILLING AT PRESENT TO TOLERATE THIS HIGHER LEVEL ACTIVITY, AND APART FROM ITS EFFORTS TO STRANGLE THE TONGA ILBO FINANCIALLY, IT HAS REFRAINED FROM GOING BEYOND TACTICAL HARASSMENT OF OPPOSITION ELEMENTS. RESULT IS CONTINUED VAGUE MIXTURE OF LIMITED REPRESSION ON THE ONE HAND AND LIMITED BUT SUBSTANTIAL EXERCISE OF CERTAIN POLITICAL RIGHTS ON THE OTHER. ALTHOUGH PERENNIAL PREDICTIONS OF SPRING CRISIS, (BUTTRESSED THIS YEAR BY ANTICIPATION THAT ECONOMIC CONDITIONS WILL FUEL PUBLIC DISENCHANTMENT) ARE NOW ABUNDANT IN SEOUL, CURRENT OPPOSITION ELEMENTS DO NOT SEEM ABLE TO FORCE SUCH A CRISIS. SHORT OF NOW UNPREDICTABLE STUDENT OUTBURST OR AN EQUALLY KQREDICTABLE OUTBURST BY PRESIDENT PARK, THE PRESENT FLUID BUT NOT INHERENTLY CONFIDENTIAL

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UNSTABLE SITUATION COULD PERSIST FOR SOME TIME. END SUMMARY.

2. THE TURN OF THE YEAR HAS SEEN A NOTICEABLE INCREASE IN OPPOSITION ACTIONS. WITH ADJOURNMENT OF NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ON DECEMBER 18, PARTY CHAIRMAN KIM YONG-SAM LED HIS NDP INTO A SERIES OF CEREMONIES AND DEMONSTRATIONS (KWANGJU, DECEMBER 20; TAEGU, DECEMBER 27; CHONGJU, JANUARY 9) INAUGURATING LOCAL OFFICES OF THE NDP'S CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION COMMITTEE. SIMILAR DEMONSTRATIONS ARE PLANNED FOR OTHER MAJOR CITIES, ALTHOUGH THEY WILL PROBABLY BE DELAYED UNTIL KIM'S RETURN IN EARLY FEBRUARY FROM A SCHEDULED VISIT TO THE U.S. AND JAPAN LATER THIS MONTH. ALTHOUGH ORIGINALLY MORBIDLY CONCERNED ABOUT THIS SORT OF "EXTRA-ASSEMBLY" ACTIVITY ON THE PART OF THE NDP, THE GOVERNMENT ACTED TO COMPLETELY IMMOBILIZE KIM AND HIS ASSOCIATES IN ONLY ONE INSTANCE (BY USE OF COUNTERDEMONSTRATING DISABLED VETERANS IN TAEGU). OTHERWISE, THE NDP PARTICIPANTS WERE PERMITTED TO HOLD THEIR CEREMONIES AND TO CONDUCT SHORT STREET DEMONSTRATIONS; SMALL CROWDS WERE PERMITTED TO GATHER AND POLICE CONTROL AND DISPERSAL METHODS WERE RELATIVELY BENING. THE NDP ACTIVITIES WERE WELL COVERED BY THE PRESS, BUT HARDLY LEFT THE IMPRESSION THAT A MAJOR POLITICAL MOVEMENT WAS IN TRAIN. THUS, ALTHOUGH KIM'S TOUR OF THE COUNTRY IS NOT OVER, THESE FIRST EFFORTS INDICATED, THAT HE WILL HAVE SOME DIFFICULTY IN SPARKING ANY SIGNIFICANT POPULAR SHOW OF SUPPORT FOR THE NDP OR CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM.

3. IN ADDITION TO NDP ACTIVITY, NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE RESTORATION OF DEMOCRACY (NCRD) HAS BEGUN TO STIR AFTER A MONTH OR SO OF QUIESCENCE FOLLOWING ITS FORMATION ON NOVEMBER 27. IT ESTABLISHED ITS CENTRAL ORGANIZATION ON DECEMBER 25 AND ON JANUARY 6 IT ISSUED A TOUGH ANTI-GOVERNMENT MANIFESTO IN THE NAME OF ONE OF ITS LEADERS, FATHER YUN HYONG-CHUN. NCRD CLAIMS TO BE ESTABLISHING A LOCAL NETWORK, BUT WHAT FORM THIS WILL TAKE OR WHO THE MEMBERS WILL BE IS NOT YET EVIDENT. ALTHOUGH THE NCRD LEADERSHIP INCLUDES KIM TAE-CHUNG, AND, IN A LESS PROMINENT ROLE, KIM YONG-SAM, WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE MOVING FORCE BEHIND IT IS THE KOREAN

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CATHOLIC CHURCH. IF THIS IS SO, THERE IS A QUESTION AS TO WHETHER NCRD CAN PROGRESS MUCH BEYOND CURRENT CATHOLIC ANTI-GOVERNMENT ACTIVITY AND BECOME A GENUINELY PAN-NATIONAL MOVEMENT. THE GOVERNMENT, IN ANY EVENT, APPEARS TO BE TAKING A WAIT-AND-SEE ATTITUDE TOWARD THE NCRD, AND APART FROM FIRING A SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR FOR SIGNING ITS CHARTER, AND MAKING SOME SHORT-TERM ARRESTS, IT HAS NOT INTERFERED

ON ANY LARGE SCALE WITH THE ORGANIZATION.

4. ON THE RELIGIOUS FRONT, PROTESTANT, CATHOLIC, AND ECUMENICAL PROTEST PRAYER MEETINGS HAVE BECOME AN ALMOST DAILY OCCURRENCE. THE GOVERNMENT HAS REACTED WITH VARIOUS FORMS OF HARASSMENT, INCLUDING BRIEF ARRESTS, INTERROGATIONS, CONFISCATION OF DOCUMENTS, BUT IT HAS NOT SERIOUSLY MOVED TO PREVENT THESE MEETINGS OR TO IMPRISON ANY OF THE PARTICIPANTS. MOST OF THESE MEETINGS HAVE BEEN ON A SMALL SCALE AND CONFINED CHIEFLY TO SEOUL, AND ROK AUTHORITIES MAY BE SATISFIED THAT ALTHOUGH THEY HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY FREQUENT, THEY CONTINUE TO ATTRACT MORE OR LESS THE SAME PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR IMPACT IS NOT WIDENING. REGIME'S SENSITIVITY TO ACTIVITIES OF FOREIGN MISSIONARIES WAS CLEARLY DEMONSTRATED IN DEPORTATION OF REV. GEORGE OGLE. SENSITIVITY REMAINS, BUT WHILE EPISODE CAUSED MISSIONARY COMMUNITY AND KOREAN CHURCH LEADERS TO UNITE IN SUPPORT OF OGLE, MISSIONARIES DO NOT APPEAR DISPOSED TO SERIOUSLY CONFRONT ROKG ON ISSUES HE ESPOUSED.

5. MAJOR CHANGE IN PRESS SITUATION HAS BEEN REGIME'S EFFORT TO FORCE TONGA ILBO TO REDUCE ITS EXTENSIVE COVERAGE OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES BY ADVISING MAJOR COMPANIES TO WITHHOLD ADVERTISEMENTS. THIS HAS PLACED TONGA UNDER SEVERE FINANCIAL PRESSURE, BUT PAPER HAS REFUSED TO KNUCKLE UNDER, AND ITS DEFIANCE HAS AROUSED GENERAL PUBLIC SUPPORT AND

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SEOUL 0339

SYMPATHY. EACH TONGA ISSUE HAS BECOME COMPENDIUM OF ANONYMOUS AND SIGNED ADS URGING TONGA TO FIGHT GOVERNMENT AND OF NEWS COLUMNS DEVOTED CHIEFLY TO THE TONGA'S STRUGGLE OR TO OTHER OPPOSITION ACTIVITY. WITHOUT EXCEPTION, GOVERNMENT CONTACTS HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED TO EMBASSY THAT AD CANCELLATION HAS BACKFIRED AND HINT THAT GOVERNMENT WOULD RETREAT IF IT COULD DO SO WITHOUT ADMITTING DEFEAT. MEANWHILE, OTHER NEWSPAPERS, INCLUDING EVEN FULLY GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED SEOUL SINMUN AND KYONGHYANG SINMUN, ARE GIVING SIGNIFICANT DEGREE OF COVERAGE TO OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES. THUS, APART FROM VIRTUALLY UNRESTRAINED TONGA ILBO ONSLAUGHT, PRESS CONTINUES TO PRESENT MIXED PICTURE OF CERTAIN RESTRICTIONS ON CONTENT COMBINED WITH SOME LATITUDE TO GIVE AT LEAST PART OF OPPOSITION SIDE OF STORY.

6. BY AND LARGE, GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE INCREASE IN OPPOSITION ACTIVITY SUGGESTS THAT ROKG BELIEVES THIS ACTIVITY STILL DOES NOT AMOUNT TO AN UNACCEPTABLE DEGREE OF PRESSURE ON THE REGIME AND THAT PIECEMEAL HARASSMENT AND BADGERING RATHER THAN MAJOR CLAMP-DOWN CAN PREVENT SUCH PRESSURES FROM BUILDING. (IN THIS REGARD, THE SHARP REACTION TO THE TONGA AD CANCELLATIONS MAY HAVE HELPED BRING HOME TO THE ROKG THE RISKS INVOLVED IN
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HAM-HANDED RETALIATION.)

7. AT THE SAME TIME (FOR WHAT IT IS WORTH) ROKG OFFICIALS, INCLUDING PRIME MINISTER KIM CHONG-PIL, FONMIN KIM TONG-CHO, AND BLUE HOUSE FIRST SENIOR SECRETARY FOR STATE AFFAIRS YU HYOK-IN, HAVE GIVEN US ASSURANCES THAT CRACK-DOWN IS NOT IN THE WORKS AND HAVE INDICATED THAT THEY ARE NOT PARTICULARLY ALARMED BY PRESENT LEVEL OF OPPOSITION ACTIVITY. OUR READING OF PAK'S JANUARY 14 PRESS CONFERENCE ALSO WOULD INDICATE CONTINUED READINESS TO TOLERATE CURRENT LEVEL OF OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES, ALTHOUGH PARK LEFT NO DOUBT THAT GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT COUNTENANCE ANY EFFORT TO MOBILIZE LARGE SCALE DEMONSTRATIONS. A THIRD FACTOR WHICH SEEMS TO POINT IN THIS GENERAL DIRECTION IS CURRENTLY PLANNED STEP-UP IN ROKG EFFORTS TO WIN SUPPORT FOR ITS POLICIES IN THE US CONGRESS AND AMONG AMERICAN PUBLIC. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT ONE ELEMENT IN THIS NEW CAMPAIGN WILL BE EMPHASIS ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH OPPOSITION

ELEMENTS CAN, WITHIN LIMITS, EXERCISE THEIR RIGHT TO CRITICIZE THE REGIME. SUCH A CAMPAGIN WOULD NOT SEEM TO BE CONSISTENT WITH PLANS FOR A MAJOR CRACKDOWN ON OPPOSITION. FINALLY, WE HAVE HEARD FROM RELIABLE SOURCES THAT THE GOVERNMENT MAY BE PLANNING A CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM FOR SOME TIME IN FEBRUARY. WHILE THE INEVITABLE GOVERNMENT VICTORY IN SUCH A REFERENDUM COULD CONCEIVABLY SET STAGE FOR SUBSEQUENT STEP-UP IN REPRESSION, WE BELIEVE GOVERNMENT WOULD HOPE THAT MASSIVE VICTORY WOULD IN ITSELF SERVE TO GIVE IMPRESSION OF WEAK AND ISOLATED OPPOSITION.

8. A NUMBER OF FACTORS COULD, OF COURSE, ALTER THIS CURRENT PICTURE OF RELATIVE RESTRAINT AND TOLERANCE. THE PERENNIAL RUMORS OF A SPRING CRISIS AS A RESULT OF STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS ARE ALREADY BEGINNING TO CIRCULATE IN SEOUL. WE HAVE HAD NO INDICATION OF STUDENT PLANS OR OF ANY EFFORTS ON THE PART OF NDP AND RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS TO WORK TOGETHER WITH STUDENT ACTIVISTS, BUT IT IS CLEAR THAT RECURRING STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS, EVEN IF CONFINED TO THE CAMPUSES, COULD SET THE STAGE FOR A FIRMER
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CRACKDOWN ON DISSENT FROM ALL QUARTERS. (WE HAVE HEARD, HOWEVER, THAT THE GOVERNMENT INTENDS TO TRY TO MOLLIFY THE STUDENTS BEFORE DEMONSTRATIONS DEVELOP BY RELEASING AT LEAST SOME OF THOSE HELD UNDER THE EMERGENCY MEASURES.) DETERIORATING ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, AND AN ALLIANCE OF REGULAR OPPOSITION ELEMENTS AND DISSATISFIED WORKERS COULD ALSO LEAD TO STEPPED UP REPRESSION. THE GOVERNMENT, HOWEVER, SEEMS INTENT ON TAKING STEPS TO MODERATE WORKER DISSATISFACTION TO THE EXTENT POSSIBLE; MOREOVER, KOREAN WORKERS, HAVE TRADITIONALLY NOT TAKEN AN ACTIVE PART IN POLITICAL MOVEMENTS. FINALLY, AN IMPORTANT CAUSE FOR CONCERN IS PRESIDENT PARK'S DEMONSTRATED TENDENCY TO OVEREACT IN UNPREDICTABLE WAYS. THUS, OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES WHICH SEEM TO BE TOLERABLE TODAY, MAY, FOR BASICALLY INEXPLICABLE REASONS, LATER TRIGGER TOUGH AND REPRESSIVE REACTIONS ON THE PART OF THE BLUE HOUSE.

9. THESE CAVEATS ASIDE, HOWEVER, THE PRESENT ROKG ESTIMATE SEEMS TO BE THAT IT CAN TOLERATE THE CURRENTLY STEPPED-UP LEVEL OF OPPOSITION ACTIVITY AND CAN CONTAIN IT WITHOUT RECOURSE TO MAJOR REPRESSIVE MOVES. FOR OUR PART, WE HAVE TAKEN APPROPRIATE OPPORTUNITIES TO GIVE BOTH SIDES THE EXPECTED COMMENT THAT EVERYONE'S INTERESTS ARE SERVED BY MODERATION.
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